

Chapter 5: Unanswered Questions for Future Research

While this report describes the approaches taken to define and measure material hardship, more work is needed to answer several key questions related to defining what constitutes material need, specifying a threshold above which people are considered well-off and no longer in material need, and identifying measurement strategies that collect data appropriate to determine whether people fall above or below a threshold. In concluding this report, we identify a number of unanswered questions that might direct future research.

Defining and Measuring Basic Material Needs

- What constitutes basic material needs for families with children, from a normative societal perspective? That is, how do Americans understand and define “basic needs?”
- To what extent should material needs included in our discussion of material hardship be universal or “absolute?” Is there an “irreducible core” of material needs that apply to all Americans? Similarly, what types, if any, of material needs based on relative circumstances (e.g., air conditioning in hot climates) should be incorporated in a material hardship measure?
- What are the minimum standards or thresholds for basic material needs? How might the intensity, severity, and duration of certain conditions be incorporated in these minimum standards? How would these standards be operationalized in material hardship measurement?
- Should the goal be to develop one consistent approach to measuring material hardship for the entire US population, or should different approaches be developed and adopted for different population groups?

Measuring Material Hardship

- To what extent do the indicators used in material hardship indexes identify the same and different population groups? Are there instances where different indicators used in hardship indexes measure the same construct (e.g., both within and across aspects of need)?
- What is the best approach to developing a hardship index? Should the set of indicators used be based on sub-scales within specific aspects of need (e.g., food security, housing security) or on a separate set of indicators that are based on a single measure? Should the focus be on individual types of hardship (e.g., food security, housing quality) or should the primary focus be on a more global index of overall material hardship? In what ways might the intensity and severity of households’ hardship conditions be summarized in a hardship index? Is there room for a categorical ranking of material need, similar to that used in food security research?

The SIPP

- Which SIPP questions have the greatest degree of face validity and are most important for measuring material hardship? Are there questions on the SIPP that have not been previously

used, or only lightly used, which could be incorporated into future research to improve our understanding of material hardship?

- What dimensions or aspects of material hardship, if any, are not covered by the SIPP? What other data sources might be used to fill these gaps in coverage?
- What ambiguities or sources of measurement error exist among the SIPP questions most often used for material hardship measurement? How might these questions be improved?

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